



CO-CREATIVE

Co-working spaces are shaking up India's business scene, says **Raj Aditya Chaudhuri**. Photographs by **Rahulnath**

Sohan Shah was looking for a temporary office for his two-person operation when he first walked into **Ministry of New** (ministryofnew.in), a co-working space in a heritage building in Mumbai's Fort area. Two years later, his ad agency, Siriti, employs 11 people, but still works out of the same office alongside many other small enterprises. "We fell in love with the place. And while we've been here, we have met interesting professionals, some of whom have become key business partners for us," he says.

Increasingly, entrepreneurs like Shah, and even his clients, are opting for co-working spaces. As small businesses have boomed, a whole industry has developed to house them. The formula is simple—a spot equipped with high-speed wi-fi, printers and conference facilities, ready to move into and typically at a fraction of the cost of renting a traditional office. And these are springing up in metros as well as smaller cities. "As many as 80 percent of all co-working spaces in India opened only last year," says Marlies

Bloemendaal, founder and owner of Ministry of New. The trend has taken off in such a big way that in February this year, India's first edition of CU Asia, the annual co-working conference, was held in Goa.

Now, for under ₹10,000 a month, entrepreneurs can grab a spot at one of the 21 offices of US-based **WeWork** (wework.com) or Holland-based **Space's** (spacesworks.com) six locations in India's major cities. You can also choose from homegrown chains such as **91 Springboard** (91springboard.com), **Cowrks** (cowrks.com) and **Awfis** (awfis.com). Just sign up online and pick the ideal setup for yourself and your team. Hot desks, meeting rooms, private cabins, virtual offices (an address for your business to direct your phone calls and post)—you can simply order off the menu. A membership at any of these chains means you have access to its branches in other cities as well.

However, many entrepreneurs are looking for a professional environment that is unlike a corporate office and even more laid-back than a co-working chain. Shah, for example, feels much more at home at the stand-alone Ministry of New, with its high, exposed ceilings, turquoise walls, colourful furniture and a swing set in the community room. Other similarly small setups with just a few outposts include Chennai's **The Grid** (thegridspace.io), **The Hive** (hiveworkspaces.com) in Chennai and Bengaluru, **The Worklab** (theworklab.in) in Pune and Mumbai's **Dextrus** (dextrus.in). These look and feel nothing like the grey-carpeted cubicles that corporate India has traditionally operated out of.

All these options offer bright, cheery décor and the promise of unlimited coffee. But it is the extras where each differentiates itself. Spaces has a custom app that unlocks its global network of members. At WeWork, you have access to gyms, terrace workstations and weekly events such as football matches and Lunch and Learn sessions. "Over a meal, a member who is a subject matter expert takes a group of peers through an informative talk on different aspects of their field," says Zia Sen, WeWork's senior community manager. →

Above: the interiors of **Ministry of New**



These spaces, in turn, are changing how corporate India does business. "While India has always been a country of joint families, this kind of collaboration with people from the business community was lacking," Sen explains. The open, inclusive design of these offices is meant to encourage collaboration. At WeWork, community managers help members find the branch where they can thrive. So, if you are a Bengaluru-based coder for start-ups and enjoy a game of football, they will help you decide which of the nine WeWorks in the city best suit you. Increasingly, even established businesses with their own offices are buying up memberships to these spots. This has given entrepreneurs a chance to interact with traditional companies, and vice versa.

The rise of shared offices has also blurred the lines between work and play—when these new moguls aren't tapping away at their desks, they are networking at events or entertaining potential clients and partners. And this is the kind of professional that members-only urban clubs aim to attract. Think **Soho House Mumbai** (sohohousemumbai.com), **The A Club** (thea.club) and **The Indus Club** (theindusclub.com) in Mumbai

Above from right: **the pool at Soho House Mumbai; a workstation at Ministry of New**

and Gurugram's **The Quorum** (thequorum.club). While they have libraries, workstations, sound-proof meeting rooms and reciprocal relationships with similar clubs around the world, it is the 'play' side of things where these spaces shine. "Each House is designed to be a home away from home for the creative community," says Joe Eva, general manager of Soho House Mumbai. "We have created a way of living designed around what our members want through the day—gym in the morning, a working breakfast, space to get things done, attend a talk or a seminar, have drinks and dinner with friends and watch a movie later. Professionals today, especially in creative fields, are rejecting the 9—5 norm. They want to merge their personal and work lives."

This is why only about 40 percent of The A's 40,000sq ft area is dedicated to work, says CEO Romil Ratra. The rest of it is bistros, bars and well-appointed common areas for guests to mingle. Soho House Mumbai enforces a strict no-cellphone policy and discourages guests from using their laptops after 7pm so they can unwind and listen to some live music. The Quorum features a gallery that exhibits a rotating collection of contemporary

pieces from the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art. Meanwhile, The Indus Club boasts a golf swing simulator so you can hit the 'green' while talking shop.

With a super-selective vetting process, a spot at these clubs is highly coveted. Soho House Mumbai, for example, only accepts new members once a quarter. Under-27s pay a joining fee from ₹10,300 and annual fee from ₹56,000, while the rest pay ₹30,900 and ₹1,13,000 respectively.

These urban clubs also boast an impressive calendar of programmes. The Quorum, for one, organises movie screenings followed by discussions with critically acclaimed directors such as Rajat Nayyar and Abhishek Verma and musical performances by the likes of Vishal Dadlani and jazz and Bossa Nova singer Sofia Hoffman. It has also hosted discussions with politicians, journalists and foreign policy experts like Shashi Tharoor, Sagarika Ghose, Rajdeep Sardesai and Navtej Sarna. Members also have access to yoga workshops, museum pop-ups and brunches. These events are a big draw for new members at these clubs.

The more our offices become like the places we socialise at, the harder it is to switch off. On the other hand, it makes work a lot more fun. **T**